

RIZZO'S BRIEF WITH NANCY PELOSI: BUSH DIDN'T INCLUDE TORTURE IN THE FINDING AUTHORIZING TORTURE

I'm going to deal with John Rizzo's purported "mea culpa" in three posts, one each for each of his regrets.

Rizzo's first regret is that the CIA did not push the White House to allow it to brief the entire intelligence committees so they could, as Rizzo said, "allow the committees—compel them, really—to take a stand on the merits to either endorse the program or stop it in its tracks."

It's an argument I totally agree with. But to make his argument, Rizzo mobilizes some of the same lies about the CIA's briefing of the torture program, notably about Nancy Pelosi. He does so, however, with a really spooky move.

Shortly thereafter, almost seven years after CIA first informed her about its employment of waterboarding and the other EITs, the Speaker of the House of Representatives, Nancy Pelosi, stood before the cameras and claimed that all CIA ever told her was that waterboarding was being "considered" as an interrogation tactic, not that it would be ever employed. Confronted with evidence to the contrary, the Speaker subsequently conceded that she had been informed about EITs from the outset but insisted she was always opposed to them but powerless to do anything to stop them. None of which was true, but in hindsight the Speaker's moonwalk was hardly unforeseeable.

It's the same old story turning the question of whether Pelosi was briefed prospectively or

historically into a claim that “she had been informed about EITs from the outset” without mentioning that even Porter Goss’ version of the briefing is consistent with Pelosi’s claim that CIA didn’t tell them in September 2002 that they had already started using torture. Rizzo’s use of this tired tactic is all the worse considering that 1) it appears that he was not at the briefing in question, and 2) the CIA changed its record of the briefing after the fact.

In other words, Rizzo’s attack on Pelosi is total bullshit. Furthermore, the attack falsely suggests that CIA briefed Congress before torture started.

But his use of Pelosi to make this point is rather intriguing. Rizzo makes no mention of Bob Graham’s attempt to exercise oversight over the torture program, which was discouraged by the CIA and thwarted by Pat Roberts.

More significantly, Rizzo makes no mention of Jane Harman, who did object to the program but proved unable to “stop it in its tracks.”

Rizzo’s silence about CIA’s briefing to Harman—and her objection to the torture program—is more significant given something else he asserts in this piece.

A few days after the attacks, President Bush signed a top-secret directive to CIA authorizing an unprecedented array of covert actions against Al Qaeda and its leadership. Like almost every such authorization issued by presidents over the previous quarter-century, this one was provided to the intelligence committees of the House and Senate as well as the defense subcommittees of the House and Senate appropriations committees. However, the White House directed that details about the most ambitious, sensitive and potentially explosive new program authorized by the President—the capture, incommunicado detention and aggressive interrogation of

senior Al Qaeda operatives—could only be shared with the leaders of the House and Senate, plus the chair and ranking member of the two intelligence committees.

Rizzo starts by invoking the September 17, 2001 Presidential Finding that authorized the CIA to capture and detain al Qaeda members. He tells us—this may be news, actually—that that Finding was briefed to the entire intelligence committees and to appropriations committees. But then he says that the torture part of that program “could only be shared” with the Gang of Eight.

The detail is interesting, by itself, for the way it contradicts Rizzo’s later (false) claim that “every other member of Congress” “would be kept in the dark” about the torture program. After all, the Leaders are also members of Congress, but if the CIA’s own error-ridden briefing list is to be believed, the only Leader who ever got briefed in that role was Bill Frist (while Appropriations Subcommittee Republicans Duncan Hunter, Ted Stevens, and Thad Cochran also got briefings, as well as John McCain).

The comment is more interesting for what it says about the Finding itself. The CIA has long suggested (and reporting has repeated) that that Finding authorized the torture program. But Rizzo is making it clear here that that Finding did not include authorization for the torture program. The oral briefings the Gang of Four got were the only way the way the President informed Congress about the torture program.

While it’s significant that Rizzo is here admitting that fact, we already knew it. We knew it because Jane Harman twice asked about a Finding on torture, once implicitly in 2003 when she asked “Have enhanced techniques been authorized and approved by the President?” and once in the briefing CIA gave her on July 13, 2004, when she, “noted that the [redacted—almost certainly the Finding] did not specify interrogations and only authorized capture and detention.”

In other words, Rizzo basically admits that the point Jane Harman appears to have made repeatedly was correct: the torture program had not been formally included in a Finding briefed to Congress.

Rizzo's lies about briefing Congress don't appear to be the issue here. Rather, the problem is that the Administration did not issue the legally required Finding to Congress.